

Country life versus urban living in ancient Rome

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Rosie Parr of Shrewsbury School is the winner of this year's Gladstone Essay Prize. Congratulations to her and to Alexander Nelson of King's College School Wimbledon who was a close runner-up.

Rome's writers generalize about urban and rural living. The key difference is often categorized as one of *otium* versus *negotium*, leisure in the countryside and business in the city – a bit like the Aristotelian dichotomy of the contemplative versus active life. The countryside is romanticized as the 'nice' place (peaceful, natural, moral, untouched by urban corruption) and the city as artificial, expensive, grimy, busy, not to mention dangerous. But dangerous can be exciting. Ovid deprecates the country-dweller as boorish and unsophisticated, while other authors were willing to admit that the city, with its baths and theatres, had its advantages. Romans wanted to have it both ways: as Horace says in his *Satires* – 'in Rome you long for the country; in the country – oh inconstant! – you praise the distant city to the stars' (*Satires* 2.7.28) – a sentiment he borrowed perhaps from Lucretius' satirical sketch of the rich man who is unhappy in his *villa rustica* and his *villa urbana*. The Romans' attitudes to the country and city are frustratingly inconsistent.

Juvenal's *Satire* 3 reveals how by themselves *negotium* and *otium* are insufficient to capture the subtlety of what distinguishes town and country. They need qualifying. Through his mouthpiece Umbricius, Juvenal peddles traditional stereotypes. Umbricius is extremely critical of the city, the noise, the exorbitant cost of living, the dangers of missiles thrown from windows onto the streets. But this satire mocks the speaker, ridiculing his views at the same time as giving voice to them. It transpires that Umbricius has fallen on hard times: 'my resources have shrunk since yesterday, and tomorrow will eat away more of what is left' (*Satires* 3.23). Given these circumstances, it is hard not to take his words as embittered exaggeration.

Truth in exaggeration

But just because the satire is hyperbolic, as satire usually is, does not mean that it

does not lend flesh to the idea of the city and the *negotium* that drives it. While Umbricius' ranting about 'inflation swell[ing] the rate of your miserable flat' and having to 'make way for some pander's son and heir, spawned in an unknown brothel (3.166)' is clearly coloured by jealousy, it underlines how fundamental money was to urban living; after all, Umbricius is leaving because of his lack of it. In fact, money is the most significant distinction that ancient authors make between the city and the country with many of them seeing the former as a drain on resources. Horace's *Epode* 2.1–4 describes the country-dweller as 'far from business dealing...and free from interest owing'. Images of visitors gaping at city-dwellers' 'doorposts inlaid with beautiful tortoiseshell' (Virgil, *Georgics* 2.462) only emphasize the folly of conspicuous consumption. A country residence was far cheaper due to the lower population density and availability of real estate. Rome in 5 B.C. had about 320,000 free citizens, a figure which puts the total population, including slaves, at nearly a million. All of this confirms the issues that Juvenal raises – the expense, the overcrowding, the danger.

The danger that Juvenal emphasizes may sound farcical but it was a real problem. Urban overcrowding meant that, as Cicero said in 63 B.C., Rome was 'set on hills and deep valleys, hanging up aloft in its tenements, its streets far from the best, its byways of the narrowest'. Accommodation soared skywards in perilously tall *insulae* as land was scarce. Juvenal's references to 'a pailful of slops' and 'the last to fry' being 'the wretch amongst the nesting pigeons with nothing but tiles between himself and the weather' add to the fun but betray real anxiety. In 50 B.C. already 14 *vici* (street blocks) were destroyed by fire, with rumours that Crassus kept a gang of thugs specially to burn down *insulae* so as to develop the land at a higher price. Even the reference to the 'slops' holds some truth, as there were complex laws in place that deter-

mined the liability of an apartment owner if a pedestrian below was hit by sewage.

Is the grass always greener?

So what does Juvenal's countryside look like? Is it as idyllic as his image of the city might lead us to believe? Unlike Virgil, whose *Georgics* present the country in all of its unadorned glory, Juvenal's countryside is too backward-looking to be a simple flipside of the town. Seemingly complimentary statements about 'falling in love with that two-tined hoe' can be seen as cutting, a reading reinforced by the use of the word 'rusticus', a pejorative word akin to the Greek word 'agroikos' or the American term 'hillbilly'. Juvenal is not alone in this sentiment. Ovid (*Amores* 3. 4.37–8) complains about the man of old-fashioned morals who objects to his wife's adultery in similar terms:

*rusticus est nimium, quem laedit
adultera coniunx
et notos mores non satis urbis
habet*

*He is a bumpkin, the man who is
hurt by an adulterous wife, and does
not know the city ways well enough.*

Here the morally and physically corrupting city is anything but – rather those who live there are to be envied. Ovid is suggesting that the countryman trails the city-dweller in modish behaviour, and that the latter is far more 'urbane' and forward-thinking. This shows that many of those living in the city were proud of their sophistication, and the attitude towards those living in the country was really quite condescending.

Such condescension is also seen in Horace at *Epode* 2.68: although mocking of Alfius the money-lender's urban fantasizing (*iam iam futurus rusticus* – always about to live in the country but never actually getting there), it also suggests that the dreamer knew where he was really better off. Alfius claims that nothing pleases him more than simple foods, and then lists urban pleasures such as 'African fowl or

Ionian pheasant', which only highlight the sparse and primitive diet of the country. This is a classic Roman trait – many Romans preached the Epicurean ideals of frugal living and *parvum quod satis est*, but from a comfortably affluent position. It was easy to romanticize poverty if one did not have to suffer it oneself.

Take Virgil for example. He talks (*Georgics* 2.461) of the countryside with 'no mansion with a swanky gate' nor the 'attire of gold brocade', statements which laud rustic simplicity and imply that the country was a place of poverty. This is further demonstrated in Horace's *Satire* 6, where he describes the famous story of the town mouse and the country mouse. The town mouse would 'barely touch each item with his dainty teeth'. Although the 'moral' of the story is to show that both city and country have distinct advantages, such images also show the condescending attitude of the elite townsfolk to their counterparts in the country. The fact that along with Ovid, who is outright in his criticism of the country, other authors such as Horace, Virgil, and Juvenal cannot be unequivocal in their praise of rural life, demonstrates that *negotium* and *otium* are not neat opposites and that the country was often considered to be economically, even morally backward.

Sex and the city

For all of these nuances to the *otium-negotium* dichotomy and different strains of sophistication and morality, immorality remained the preserve of an urban existence. Ovid went so far as to suggest that as Romulus and Remus were born in less than pure circumstances, adultery was at the very heart of the capital city. For all that he is stretching the point here (Romulus and Remus were born to a Vestal Virgin who had little choice but sleep with Mars!), urban adultery did pose a problem for Roman moralists. Despite Augustus' *Leges Juliae*, aiming to abolish the rising culture of infidelity, and promote marriage, adultery continued in the capital, to the extent that Augustus' own daughter and grand-daughter were exiled for it.

Such behaviour is castigated by many writers, including Virgil, who in the *Georgics* throws the immorality of the city into relief by highlighting how country-dwellers have 'reverence for God, respect for the family'. Juvenal too cannot keep sex out of the equation: Umbricius introduces characters such as the deceptive Greeks and the garish prostitute to present an ethically repugnant portrayal of city life as characterized by meretricious deceit. Of course such debauchery must have occurred in the country too, but the population density, not to mention the marked divide in some parts of the city

between rich and poor, meant that there were more people to be desirous and more people to be desperate (desperate enough to sell their bodies).

In this way then, ancient authors portray the city as immoral and the country as pure, possibly prompting the remark from Marcus Terentius Varro that 'Divine Nature gave the fields, human art built the cities', a phrase which paints the country as godly, and the city as the offspring of sinful man. Such emphasis leads to the idea that the countryside followed the *mos maiorum*, a reverence for ancestors and respect for customary morals. In the city, meanwhile, the 'Golden Days' of old continue to be viewed with nostalgia.

Otium seems too weak to capture this kind of goodness. But then the Romans' attitudes have been shown to be far more layered than the polarisation of rural *otium* and urban *negotium* suggests. Generalization has some place, but complex issues of money, morality, ancestry and sophistication make it difficult to sustain. Juvenal, Ovid, and Virgil all assert that the country occupies the moral high ground over the city which is a breeding ground of debauchery and deceit. But their writings are the product of an urban culture – the largest metropolis in the known world at the time. The city was seen to have other advantages – the luxury, the food, the amenities, each of which might qualify as *amoenus* – while the countryside, for all of its purity, lacked complexity and may well have seemed boring. Longing for the greener grass and the purer air of the countryside did not stop them developing the richest urban environment they could, and the pastoral idylls of Virgil and Horace remained cosy dreams, untouched by the realities of real rustic life.